

The Seeds of Thomas Merton: On Staying Put and Changing Your Life

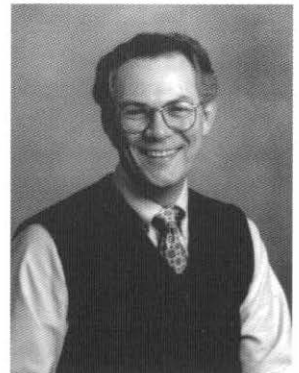
by Walt Chura

Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.—John 12:24

Seeds have no home. They are blown about by wind, float hither and yon across the water, get carried about in the bellies of birds and cows to be deposited often wherever the dung drops. Seeds don't change essentially in all this wandering, except that many are destroyed in the process. Seeds change when they get planted, germinate, take root. Then, stabilized, comes real transformation: growth, flowering, deep-rootedness. So also with the lives of men and women. So with Thomas Merton: monk, mystic, and ordinary person.

In addition to the familiar vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, Benedictines take vows of *stability* and *conversio morum*: vows to stay put in the monastery where they are planted and to "change manners," that is, to be continually deepening roots, growing, flowering. Merton speaks to other ordinary Christians and spiritual seekers precisely because his life and work illustrate the graceful potential in our own perhaps unattractive seeds. Merton demonstrates that the place for seed-change is nowhere but now here and that the dung which has clung to the seed may be the manure that nourishes the flower.

If ours has been a collectivistic century, Thomas Merton has been our most articulate prophet of solitude. "It is clear to me," he wrote in December 1949 (age 34, eight years a monk), "that solitude is my vocation."¹ Less than a week later, Merton noted, "In the natural order, perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers."² "In the natural order," the order, if you will, of seeds, Merton experienced not only a "severe mother" but the death of his mother at six, with only a note from her to say good-bye. He also suffered the frequent absences of his artistic father, the instability of frequent moves, separation from the grandparents he loved and from his younger brother, John Paul, who was left in the U.S. with his grandparents while Tom and his father lived variously in Bermuda, France, and England. As he tells of these peregrinations and separations in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, young monk Merton (writing in his thirties) reflects that "as a child, and since then too, I have



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always tended to resist any kind of possessive affection on the part of any human being—there has always been a profound instinct to keep clear, to keep free.”³ Even as a youth, Tom enjoyed the seclusion of a quiet corner with a stack of books, whether at the offices of Grosset and Dunlap where Pop, his grandfather, worked, in field and wood, or even in a hotel while others went sight-seeing.

In the freedom of his adolescence, his father having died when Tom was sixteen and his generous grandfather having settled an income on him, Merton wandered about Germany and Italy. During his Italian tour he had a vision of his dead father and experienced a short-lived religious awakening upon viewing some Byzantine mosaics in churches he visited, at first, as nothing more than aesthetic depositories. “And thus without knowing anything about it,” he writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, this young tourist “became a pilgrim.”⁴ During school vacations in England, Merton explored countryside and village. In the U.S., while living with his grandparents, he haunted the wilds of New York’s urban jungle and spent time as a barker at the Chicago World’s Fair.

Years later (1962), a more mature Thomas Merton writes again of his vocation in a letter to Abdul Aziz, a Pakistani Moslem with whom he corresponded concerning Sufi and Christian prayer and mysticism. “I believe my vocation is essentially that of a pilgrim and an exile in life.”⁵ By this time the seed of the tourist/wanderer has flowered into a perpetual pilgrim and the seed of the exile has roots of great depth. In this same letter to Aziz, Merton says, “My life...is a mystery which I do not attempt to understand, as though I were led by the hand in a night where I see nothing....” The fascination of *The Seven Storey Mountain* rests in part in revealing that hand to the reader, or in our metaphor, revealing the Spirit-Breath as it blows the seeds of Thomas Merton across the surface of the world toward their place of burial and growth.

Before examining more carefully the place (*stability*) of burial and *growth (conversio morum)* of the seeds of Thomas Merton, we must pay some attention to another of the seeds in the “natural order.” When one comes fresh to the early works of Merton, one cannot fail to be struck by the nearly totally uncritical gloss the young monk puts over most things Catholic and the severe, even caustic judgments he pronounces of things—and people—non-Catholic. This is especially true in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, somewhat less so in *The Sign of Jonas*, yet still present in *Seeds of Contemplation*. The phenomenon diminishes steadily thereafter. However, the critical bent of Merton’s mind and the sharp edge of his words seem to have their origins in the “natural order.” Thomas Merton was bred to “a deep and all-embracing attachment to my own judgement [sic] and my own will and a constant turning away from subjection, toward the freedom of my own ever-changing horizons.” His mother intended him to be independent. “I was to be an original.... I was not to be an article thrown together, on the common bourgeois pattern.”⁶ His beloved Pop’s penchant for anti-Semitic and especially anti-Catholic denunciations further impressed him. During this time as ward of his godfather, Dr. Tom Bennett, Merton’s “wholesale and glib detraction of all the people with whom I did not agree or whose taste and ideas offended me” was fostered.⁷ Judgment, of course, was to be rendered on the basis of considered and intellectually superior grounds, in light of “ever-changing horizons.”

The seeds of Thomas Merton—loneliness, homelessness, judgmentalism (self-centeredness)—are the seeds of contemplation and prophecy. First the seed, then the shoot, then the flower and the fruit (see Mark 4:26–29). In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he tells the tale of his seeds being carried by the wind of God’s breath to fertile ground in a garden called Gethsemani, where, some stability having been achieved,

he can change deeply and grow. However, as Merton writes in the last line of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, “*Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi.*” While we witness the conversion to Catholic Christianity of a young, self-centered man of great appetites who “believes in nothing” (least of all in restraint or penance, or in a God who admonishes them) and watch him struggle with finding his place in that Church, we also discover a triumphalistic young Catholic and novice monk of no little naïve religiosity. We await the *conversio morum* of the monk.

The callow monk-narrator of *The Seven Storey Mountain* does not refrain from the “glib detraction” of many with whom he disagrees. He targets Anglicans, Quakers, Episcopalians and to some degree practitioners of Oriental spiritualities. He dismisses the Christians of those denominations as shallow, class conscious, even foolish. Eastern meditation he judges as good only as an aid in relaxing oneself so one can get to sleep! Zion Episcopal church, to which his grandparents contributed and where his father had occasionally played the organ, receives multiple barbs. Narrator Merton subjects the reader to sermonettes on the social and spiritual consequences of not sending Catholic children to Catholic schools and to self-deprecating condemnations of such questionable behavior as going to the movies.

Yet it is important to examine this kind of material in *The Seven Storey Mountain* without the kind of post-Vatican II glibness contemporary readers might be tempted to. Given the instability of Merton’s life before his conversion, it seems quite predictable that he would be comforted by the exaggerated certitude which distinguished the Roman Church of the time. Secondly, the attitude of the narrator reflects the seeds of the “natural order” still to “die” and be transformed in the neophyte monk, especially the seeds we have called judgmentalism and the practical talent for the sharp barb to deliver the judgment. Yet a careful reading reveals remarkable signs of an openness in the author which exhibit attitudes which transcend those prevailing among Catholics of the period. The narrator of *The Seven Storey Mountain* indicates no fear that his loved ones are condemned to hell for failure to become members of the one, true church. He has nothing but praise for the “pagan monk” Bramachari, for the spirituality and asceticism of his order. He comes closest to criticism of anything Catholic when he writes that “the life of these pagan monks is one of such purity and holiness and peace, in the natural order, that it may put to shame the actual conduct of Christian religious in spite of their advantages or constant access to the means of grace.”⁸ Merton likewise takes to task the standard of living and the priorities of Christian missionaries in comparison with that of the pagan monks.

Most strikingly, Thomas Merton refers to the Providential part played in his conversion by such non-Catholics as, in addition to Bramachari himself (who had recommended St. Augustine and Thomas a Kempis to him), Mark Van Doren and Robert Lax. Of those present at his baptism, only one was Catholic; three—Lax, Gerdy and Seymour—were Jews.

Merton’s journal *The Sign of Jonas* begins on the fifth anniversary of his being planted in the garden of Gethsemani Abbey. In it we begin to see the germination and sprouting of the seeds of Thomas Merton. Where the young monk of *The Seven Storey Mountain* continued to harbor some sense in which the world was so evil as to merit “to be first ridiculed, then spat upon, and at last formally rejected with a curse,” Merton now conceded that “I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find this place in the world I will be wasting my time in the monastery.”⁹ He does not waste his time in the monastery, but neither does he rest easy. The stability he gains at Gethsemani feels a lot like burial of that old seed-self. Like some supernatural Huck Finn, this soul stricken with wanderlust wants to strike out for the territory—of the Carthusians, a new Cistercian foundation, a hermitage.

As one looks at him, however, one discovers with him that, once seeds are planted, change, travel, mean something different. The journey in *The Sign of Jonas* is a pilgrimage to contemplation. It is travel to deeper levels, where in interior darkness the seed of loneliness is transformed into a solitude where relationship with Being defies separation. The pilgrimage to contemplation is a journey in which one must discard burdensome baggage, like seed shedding its outer shell. Merton's presuppositions about what his life as a monk would be had to be stripped—including his stated desire to stop writing. "Even the consolation of prayer, lights of the intellect and sensible fervor in the will: everything burns me at least lightly. I cannot hold onto anything."¹⁰ Only if he suffers the necessity of stability can his life truly change. Like *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Sign of Jonas* shows the reader not just the change but also the struggle to deal with the death and burial necessary to bring about the change.

One of the things Merton discovers about being planted in Gethsemani is that, like Thoreau in Concord, he can "travel much" within the confines of stability. Even the physical environs of the enclosure, he finds, are a world of flora, fauna, and sky which he can explore and which prove to be way stations on his pilgrimage to contemplation and companions which deepen his solitude. "God talks in the trees,"¹¹ he writes. "I looked at all this great tranquility, with my soul and spirit quiet. For me landscape seems to be very important for contemplation."¹² He asserts, "We do not realize our setting as we ought to: it is important to know where you are put on the face of the earth."¹³ The Epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas*, "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952," provides the reader with a metaphorical narrative of the pilgrimage to contemplation with someone whose seeds of wandering have put down roots in a particular place "on the face of the earth" but who has begun that pilgrimage in the company of a solitude still deepening. As the journal progresses, the reader learns more and more of the "shucking" of his shell which Merton has endured, yet how, as he surrenders his will, he attains what he needs (as when he is refused special time in the woods for prayer by himself, then is given even more time there with his scholastics whom he experiences as a *family*, who become companions in solitude).

The seeds of a lonely, rootless childhood are buried in Gethsemani. In this stable soil their transformation has begun. Now even the monk must die: *conversio morum*. "The man who began this journal is dead, just as the man who finished *The Seven Storey Mountain* when this journal began was also dead, and what is more the man who was the central figure in *The Seven Storey Mountain* was dead over and over."¹⁴ Thus I stand on the threshold of a new existence," Merton realized. "For now I am a grown-up monk and have no time for anything but the essentials. The only essential is...God Himself, Who [can]...be found...only by sinking into the heart of the present as it is."¹⁵

Thomas Merton was urged by his confessor to write of the contemplative pilgrimage as early as 1946. He published *Seeds of Contemplation*, a book he likened in form to Pascal's *Pensees*. The ghosts of the "dead monks" of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas* haunt this work in which the "world" is still to be ridiculed, spat upon, and rejected, even (in the book's progressive aspect) by the laity for whom contemplation is offered as a possibility. Traditions other than Christian are scorned, e.g., Sufism. By December of 1949 Merton felt the need of some revision to the text, but by 1962 he published a revision and expansion different enough to require the title *New Seeds of Contemplation*, where the "grown-up monk" is much in evidence, as is the transformation that has taken place in the seeds buried for some years now in the garden of Gethsemani. Merton's vocation to solitude and to pilgrimage and to contemplation has borne fruit. He reveals additional evidence of this in his correspondence.

Merton writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, “Every expression of the will of God is in some sense...a seed of new life.”¹⁶ Obviously then, the seeds “in the natural order” of Merton’s life, specifically his loneliness and homelessness as a child and his critical mind, are seeds for his own experience of contemplation which seems to underline his reflections on the subject. Remembering Merton’s “instinct to keep clear, to keep free,” for example, a reaction to protect oneself from the pain of enforced separation, the reader finds in *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton’s transformed sense that “reality is to be sought not in division but in unity, for we are ‘members of one another.’”¹⁷ The seed of loneliness has been buried; the way to contemplation has been a solitude which is not separation. “True solitude is the home of the person,” Merton has come to claim. “Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them in God.”¹⁸ The solitude Merton writes of throughout *New Seeds of Contemplation* is one which has the sole purpose of union—union with the Reality of God, which means, since God is the ground of Being, union with all that comes from God: all of Creation. The only separation such solitude effects is that from one’s own unreal, false self.

In his 1962 letter to Aziz in which Merton speaks of his vocation to be “a pilgrim and an exile in life,” he writes, “I have no proper place in the world.”¹⁹ The reader will remember that Merton spoke in *The Sign of Jonas* of having come to the monastery precisely to find his place in the world. In this letter written more than ten years later he does not contradict himself. Rather he confirms the success of his mission. Merton has found that his place in the world is “nowhere”—the nowhere of contemplation, the “sinking into the heart of the present,” the now-here of contemplation. “In returning to God and to ourselves, we have to begin with what we actually are. We have to start from our alienated condition. We are prodigals in a distant country, the ‘region of unlikeness,’” he writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, “and we must seem to travel far in that region before we seem to reach our own land (and yet secretly we are in our own land all the time!).”²⁰ As you progress along the pilgrimage to contemplation, “you do not go anywhere,” he writes. In language which mixes the metaphors of place and relationship, Merton writes in words reminiscent of a younger Merton’s seeds: in contemplation, true freedom, infinite Freedom, means that “no space” is “all space” and that relationship becomes “not two loves, one waiting for the other, striving for the other, seeking the other, but Love Loving in Freedom.”²¹ In the language of our “seed” metaphor, he writes, “You are not you, you are fruition.”²² Buried in the stability of the monastery, the seeds of Thomas Merton, lonely and rootless boy, have been transformed into a pilgrim who proclaims, “We have got to travel in the void and be perfectly happy about it.... We must pass on to the unknown.”²³

Not just solitude nor just pilgrimage are Merton’s vocation. He has declared that exile, too, is his vocation. “For that reason, I am in some sense to be the friend and brother of people everywhere, especially those who are pilgrims and exiles like myself.”²⁴ The fruition of Merton’s solitude, pilgrimage and exile are contemplation. Yet in some sense, his exile is that of the prophet sprung up from the soil of contemplation, from the buried seed of his judgmentalism “in the natural order.” Bred to be an “original,” Thomas Merton, in his self-centered youth, developed the ability to endure his multiple experiences as an “outsider,” to overcome his “differentness” by charm and wit and self-promotion. Even after his conversion, the temptation to make a reputation for himself was strong. As we have seen, the pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, written after several years in the monastery, are not without clear examples of “wholesale and glib detraction” of people with whom he disagreed. Yet the reader can find, even in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a transformation of Merton’s judgmentalism into the begin-

nings of the prophetic voice which found fruition only after his contemplative journey deepened. While his sharp critiques not just of Communism, but, prophetically, of capitalism, in *The Seven Storey Mountain*—published during the birth of the Cold War—seemed to have done no harm to the book’s popularity, one wonders how they escaped strong denunciation by the sizeable Catholic political right wing of the era. Equally intriguing is the lack of outrage at his clear anti-war stance, including a decision not to accept a combat role even in “the last good war,” as commentator Studs Terkel ironically dubbed World War II. Even though the anti-war position finally proposed in *SSM* operates within the traditional parameters of the just war theory, Merton’s application certainly constituted an extreme minority position within American Catholicism. Not missing from Merton’s articulation of his social views throughout *The Seven Storey Mountain* is the sharp edge of his verbal facility.

In *The Sign of Jonas* we have glimpses of Merton’s continued interest in Eastern spiritualities, reminding us of his admiration for the pagan monks expressed in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Through the various stages of revision in *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton shows himself opening more and more to other spiritual traditions, expunging, for example, his disparaging remarks about Sufism. At about the time of the writing of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he had opened correspondence with people like Abdul Aziz. Up to this point, in most of Merton’s published comments, his prophetic stance has been of a “positive” nature, an openness to “ever changing horizons.” Even in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, where he remarks on the “world” in its worst aspects, from materialism to militarism, the tone tends towards “annunciation” rather than denunciation (to use Catholic Worker co-founder Peter Maurin’s word). He shows us what retards our progress toward contemplation. The fruition of Merton’s seed of judgmentalism (once it was buried in deeper contemplation), that is, his vocation to the exile of prophecy, comes in the sixties when, concerning social issues, East-West spirituality issues, and Catholic “ecclesial” issues, Merton finds it necessary to use strong language, sometimes even harsh language. This language, now often directed at Catholics, sometimes at his Superiors, reminds one of the barbs in *The Seven Storey Mountain* directed at non-Catholics! While his most critical denunciations of individuals are reserved for private correspondence and journal entries, his critiques in works for public consumption are sharp enough for Trappist censors to reinforce Thomas Merton’s vocation as “exiled prophet” as a matter of obedience, at least on issues of war and peace. Yet Merton found within the bounds of obedience a way to let his prophetic voice be heard.

In the vows of *stability* and *conversio morum*, a monk’s life can exemplify for all ordinary Christians the necessity of rootedness in order to grow more deeply and reach the fruition of human existence which is consciousness of union with God and with all, in God. The American ethos fosters the values of renewal and growth but often at the expense of rootedness. Our hyper-mobile and meta-fragmented society exacerbated by excessive individualism gives novelty a primary market value. Those who seek to find God in their lives often fail to recognize in the dung-covered seeds of the “natural order” the potential for new life. It is our national and ecclesial passion to harvest meaning in our lives by clear-cutting and moving to a new forest: a new city, a new job, a new car, a new house, a new significant other; a new parish, a new renewal program, a new therapist, a new me. Often God uses our restlessness like a wind to move our seeds in the natural order. Thomas Merton certainly experienced such winds of restlessness. Eventually, however, we must recognize the garden where we must take stable root—where we must “stay put,” not to stagnate in some moldy bliss, but to allow our roots in the Hidden Ground of Love to take hold precisely in order to be able to change and grow most profoundly regard-

less of the buffeting storms encountered in any life.

The life and work of Thomas Merton, monk, mystic, and ordinary human being, demonstrates not only how the seeds of the “natural order” can be transformed in the “order of grace,” but also how each of us can be the seed to bring forth fruit in the lives of others. As God continues to use Merton in our lives, we are used to Divine purpose in the lives of others. We do not know what God may be doing with us. We are under the guidance of “a hand in the night,” which we resist at the peril of our “very [i.e., True] Self.” In God’s hand our lives are a mystery. This hand of God, this Breath of God, blew Thomas Merton to Gethsemani to be buried. There he stayed put and never stopped changing. This is how ordinary people become monks and mystics wherever their garden of Gethsemani.

Coming to the monastery has been exactly the right kind of withdrawal. It has given me perspective...And now I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life. My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of the human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. And my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe everybody else.²⁵

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, 1953) 257.
2. *Sign of Jonas* 262.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1948) 57.
4. *Seven Storey Mountain* 108.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. Thomas H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, 1985) 52.
6. *Seven Storey Mountain* 11.
7. *Seven Storey Mountain* 79.
8. *Seven Storey Mountain* 192.
9. *Sign of Jonas* 322.
10. *Sign of Jonas* 51.
11. *Sign of Jonas* 107.
12. *Sign of Jonas* 109.
13. *Sign of Jonas* 201.
14. *Sign of Jonas* 328.
15. *Sign of Jonas* 330.
16. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972) 14.
17. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 47–48.
18. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 53.
19. *Hidden Ground of Love* 52.
20. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 280–81.
21. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 283.
22. *New Seeds of Contemplation* 283.
23. *Hidden Ground of Love* 355.
24. *Hidden Ground of Love* 52.
25. *Sign of Jonas* 322–23.